

INTRODUCTION

Reality dawned slowly in the North during the secession year of 1861. Three months after the South fired the opening shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter, the United States still expected that one battle would destroy the rebellion. Consequently, the government augmented its inconsiderable Regular Army with only a small number of three-month volunteers. On 21 July 1861, Union forces met the Confederate foe at Manassas. The rebels sent them reeling back to Washington and awakened the North to its folly.¹

On the next day, Congress authorized President Abraham Lincoln to accept 500,000 volunteers for three years' service. The northern states began enlisting and equipping the recruits, and Lincoln brought to Washington a promising young general officer, George B. McClellan, to train and organize the new troops into an effective fighting force. Patriotic fervor facilitated mobilization. Lawyers and businessmen as well as farmers and laborers scrambled to **enlist**.²

Among the thousands of men who responded to the call for volunteers was a gray-eyed, brown-haired, 19-year-old farmboy named Thomas James Owen. The five-foot eight-inch, fair-skinned son of Thomas and Almira Owen enlisted on 14 August 1861. Unlike most of his peers, Owen entered the service as a sergeant rather than as a **private**.³

Along with 44 men, including friends and neighbors, Owen enrolled in Captain E.R. Patten's company at Owego, Tioga County, New York, his hometown. Other men from various towns in New York and Pennsylvania also joined the company. By 24 August, the unit totaled 83. The company traveled to Elmira, just west of Owego, where it assembled with nine other companies to form Stuart's Independent Regiment.⁴

Governor Edwin D. Morgan of New York originally authorized Charles B. Stuart, formerly the state engineer and surveyor, to raise and command a regiment of infantry. While at Elmira, Colonel Stuart set about instructing his men and oversaw their muster into federal service by a Regular Army officer. At that point, Owen officially became a member of Company I, Fiftieth New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment.

In late September 1861, the regiment went to Washington D.C., by train. After a short stay in the capital, it moved to Hall's Hill in Virginia. Here the regiment underwent a drastic change. General McClellan, in desperate need of combat Engineers, detailed the Fiftieth New York to act as sappers, miners, and pontoniers. In reassigning the regiment, McClellan noted the "unusual number of sailors and mechanics" in the Fiftieth. Thus, the Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, its official designation after 17 July 1862, had many new jobs to learn and perform, including laying ponton bridges, erecting field fortifications, and constructing roads.⁶



General Barton S. Alexander, first commander of the Volunteer Engineer Brigade. *Library of Congress photograph B812-9342.*

In late October 1861, the regiment returned to Washington. There it settled in at Camp Lesley, which eventually became known as the Washington Engineer Depot, about one-half mile north of the Navy Yard on the Anacostia River.⁷ Soon afterward, the Fifteenth New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, also detailed as combat Engineers, encamped nearby. These two regiments formed the Volunteer Engineer Brigade of the Army of the Potomac, commanded successively by Lieutenant Colonel Barton S. Alexander, Brigadier General Daniel P. Woodbury, and Brigadier General Henry W. Benham.

On the other side of the Navy Yard, the Regular Army's small Engineer force bivouacked near the Washington Arsenal, at the site of present-day Fort Lesley J. McNair. This Battalion of Engineers worked closely with the Volunteer Engineer Brigade throughout the war and for a brief time, from 20 April to 7 July 1863, was part of it. Together, these units constituted the entire permanent Engineer force of the Army of the Potomac and performed valuable service throughout the Civil War.⁸

Sergeant Owen was responsible for training the men under him and leading them on the march and in battle. He performed his duties well. In early 1863, he received a promotion to first sergeant, which made him the senior noncommissioned officer in his company. Later he became a commissioned officer, receiving a promotion to second lieutenant on 17 March 1864 and first lieutenant as of 15 October 1864. In addition, he served as acting assistant quartermaster for his unit from 12 July 1864 until 1 June 1865.⁹

Owen's letters and diary are a worthy contribution to the literature of the Civil War. Few published, firsthand accounts by Civil War Engineers exist, especially for units in the Army of the Potomac. Gilbert Thompson, a private and later a corporal in the Battalion of Engineers, wrote a history of his unit, which included a day-by-day account of operations. An enlisted man in the Fifteenth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, writing under the pseudonym Don Pedro Quarendo Reminisco, published a book of poetry about his war experiences. Wesley Brainerd, an officer in the Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, penned an article on the laying of ponton bridges during the Fredericksburg campaign. Seven letters of Deloss S. Burton, an enlisted man in the Fiftieth, appeared in print recently. These are the only published, firsthand accounts pertaining to the Fiftieth.¹⁰

Owen's writings shed needed light on a relatively unknown and neglected aspect of the Civil War-combat engineering. The Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment participated in every major campaign of the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula to Appomattox. Among its achievements were field fortifications at Yorktown and Petersburg; ponton bridges at Fredericksburg and in the Peninsula; Antietam, Gettysburg, and Wilderness-Spotsylvania campaigns; and corduroy roads in Virginia and Maryland. Also, Owen and some of his subordinates assisted Philip Sheridan on his expeditions to the Shenandoah Valley in

1864 and 1865.

Finally, Owen's jottings document his varied career. At first, he was a noncommissioned officer overseeing the actions of a squad of men. Later, as senior noncommissioned officer and commissioned lieutenant, he assisted in administering a company. During the last year of the Civil War, he was a staff officer and commanded a unit the size of a company during the absences of his superior. Few northern farmboys had similar experiences during the war.

Following the Civil War, Owen returned to Owego, but he left home in October 1865 and moved to Michigan. Settling in Big Rapids on the Muskegon River in the central part of the state, he worked as a clerk in a store and as a bookkeeper. Apparently, he also obtained employment in the lumber business. During his 25-year residency in Michigan, Owen and his wife Alice, also a New Yorker, had one child, Blanche, who was born about 1875.¹¹

In 1890, Owen moved to a farm outside Rhinelander, in north central Wisconsin. Engaged in farming for the rest of his life, Owen also surveyed timberland for the U.S. government. Additionally, he estimated the value of lumber on land owned by various companies. In 1913, Owen attended the Fiftieth Anniversary Veterans Reunion at Gettysburg and visited Owego. Following his return to Rhinelander, he fell ill and, on 4 March 1915, entered the Northwestern Branch, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On 7 April, he died of Bright's disease and a weak heart and was buried in the soldiers' home cemetery in Milwaukee.¹²

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

I. Francis F. Wilshin, *Manassas (Bull Run) National Battlefield Park, Virginia* (Washington, DC: Government Printing office, 1953), pp. 5-6 and 16-18; James G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Second Edition, Revised, Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1969), pp. 192, 199-200, and 230; and Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army 1775-1945* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1953), pp. 92-100.

2. Leonard L. Lerwill, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954), p. 73; Kreidberg and Henry, *Military Mobilization*, pp. 93-94 and 97-98; Wilshin, *Manassas (Bull Run)*, p. 18; and War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880- 1901) (hereafter referred to as *Official Records, Army*), Series I, Volume 2, p. 753.

3. No explanation of Owen's enlistment as a sergeant while others became privates was found. Thomas J. Owen, Compiled Military Service Record, Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, Carded Records, Volunteer Organizations: Civil War (hereafter referred to as Owen, CMSR), Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives Building (hereafter referred to as RG 94); Thomas J. Owen, C2533270, Military Service Pension Application Files, 1861- 1934 (hereafter referred to as Owen, Pension), Record Group 15, Records of the Veterans Administration, National Archives Building (hereafter referred to as RG 15); Numbers 5-8, p. 257, Owego Roll, 604, Microcopy 432, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*, and Numbers 27-31, p. 402, Owego, Roll 867, Microcopy 653, *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, both in Record Group 29, Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives Building (hereafter referred to as RG 29); and Kreidberg and Henry, *Military Mobilization*, p. 98.

4. New York Adjutant General's Office, *A Record of the Commissioned Officers, Noncommissioned Officers and Privates of the Regiments Which Were Organized in the State of New York . . .* (Albany: Comstock and Cassidy Printers, 1864), Volume 2, p. 328; New York State Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga, *Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1902) (hereafter referred to as NYSMC, *Final Report*), Volume 3, p. 1090; Frederick Phisterer, compiler, *New York in the War of the Rebellion 1861 to 1865* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1912), pp. 1669-1670; Thomas E. Byrne, "Elmira, 1861-1865: Civil War Rendezvous," *Chemung Historical Journal* 9 (June 1964), pp. 1247-1252; and General Order No. 58, Adjutant General's Office, 15 August 1861, Orders and Circulars, 1797-1910 (hereafter referred to as O&C), RG 94.

5. NYSMC, *Final Report*, Volume 3, pp. 1090-1091; Kreidberg and Henry, *Military Mobilization*, p. 98; Byrne, "Elmira, 1861-1865," pp. 1247-1252;

Dumas Malone, ed., "Charles Beebe Stuart," *Dictionary of America Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), Volume 18, p. 163; "Very Rough Outline of History of 50th N.Y. Engineers, Made August 1911," in the William Watts Folwell Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter referred to as "Rough History," Folwell Papers, MHS), p. 4; and General Order No. 58, Adjutant General's Office, 15 August 1861, O&C, and Record of Events Cards (hereafter referred to as REC), Regimental Return, August 1861, Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, Roll 136, Microcopy 594, *Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations* (hereafter referred to as M594), RG 94.

6 "Rough History," Folwell Papers, MHS, pp. 4-5; *U.S. Statutes at Large* 597 (Section 20); George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1887), p. 119; *The Union Army*. . . (Madison, Wisconsin: Federal Publishing Company, 1908), Volume 2, pp. 86-87; NYSMC, *Final Report*, Volume 3, p. 1091; *Official Records, Army*, Series I, Volume 5, pp. 24-25, and Volume 6, pp. 172-173, and Series III, Volume 1, p. 534; Phillip M. Thienel, "Engineers in the Union Army, 1861- 1865 ," *The Military Engineer* 47 (January-February 1955), pp. 36-38; REC, Regimental Return, October 1861, Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, Roll 136, M594, RG 94; and Paragraph 15, Special Order No. 113, Army of the Potomac, 22 October 1861, Volume 27AP, p. 215 (hereafter referred to as SO 113, A of P), Special Orders, Army of the Potomac (hereafter referred to as SOs, A of P), Record Group 393, Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821- 1920, National Archives Building (hereafter referred to as RG 393).

7. SO 113, A of P, and SOs, A of P, RG 393. Some authors have stated that the Volunteer Engineer Brigade Depot or Washington Engineer Depot was near the Engineer Battalion Headquarters at the foot of 4 1/2 Street, SW. See Engineer School, *History and Traditions of the Corps* (Fort Belvoir, Virginia: Engineer School Press, 1953), p. 29; and Warren T. Hannum, "The Crossing of the James River 1864," *The Military Engineer* 15 (May-June 1923), p. 232. Actually, Camp Lesley/Washington Engineer Depot was "one-half mile above the U.S. Navy Yard" and "on the right bank of the Eastern branch of the Potomac" (Anacostia), probably at the foot of East 14th and/or 15th Streets. See "Rough History," Folwell Papers, MHS, p. 5; Chief of Engineers to Henry W. Benham, 25 November 1863, Volume 36, p. 164, Letters Sent to Engineer Officers, Record Group 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, National Archives Building; Daniel P. Woodbury to George Ford, 3 September 1862, Volume 52/ 117AP, Letters Sent, Engineer Brigade, Army of the Potomac, RG 393; and *Official Records Army*, Series I, Volume 29, Part II, pp. 462-467.

8. Gilbert Thompson, *The Engineer Battalion in the Civil War*, Occasional Papers No. 44 (Washington Barracks, DC: Press of the Engineer School, 1910), pp. 1-4 and 100; G.A. Youngberg, *History of Engineer Troops in the United States Army 1775-1901*, Occasional Papers No. 37 (Washington Barracks, DC: Press of the Engineer School, 1910), pp. 63-70; Thienel, "Engineers in the Union Army, " p. 38; *Official Records Army*, Series I, Volume 2, Part I, p. 36, and Part II, p. 108, and Volume 25, Part II, p. 150, and Volume 51,

Part I, p. 497; NYSMC, *Final Report*, Volume 3, p. 1091; "Rough History," Folwell Papers, MHS, pp. 4-5; and Paragraph 7, Special Order No. 122, Army of the Potomac, 29 October 1861, p. 235, and Paragraph 19, Special Order No. 61, Army of the Potomac, 3 March 1862, p. 585, both in Volume 27AP, and Paragraph 5, Special Order No. 108, Army of the Potomac, 20 April 1863, page 274, and paragraph 2, Special Order No. 182, Army of the Potomac, 7 July 1863, p. 400, both in Volume 29AP, SOs, A of P, RG 393.

9. Owen, CMSR, and 13015 VS 1865, Letters Received, Volunteer Service Division (hereafter referred to as LR, VSD), RG 94.

10. Gilbert Thompson, *The Engineer Battalion; Don Pedro Quarendo Reminisco, Life in the Union Army; or, Notings and Reminiscences of a Two Years' Volunteer* (New York: H. Dexter, Hamilton and Company, 1863); Wesley Brainerd, "The Pontoniers at Fredericksburg," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. 4 Volumes (New York: Century Company, 1887-1888), Volume 3, pp. 121-122; Charles E. Dornbusch, compiler, *Military Bibliography of the Civil War* (New York: New York Public Library, 1961-1972), Volume 1, pp. 23-29, Volume 2, pp. 35, 63-64, 143, and 157, and Volume 3, page 61; and Deloss S. Burton, "Spot-Sylvania: Letters From The Field; An Eyewitness," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 22 (April 1983), pp. 22-27.

11. Owen, Pension, RG 15; Numbers 12 and 13, p. I, Michigan, Mecosta County, Big Rapids, First Ward, Roll 690, Microcopy 593, *Ninth Census of the United States*, 1870, and Numbers 13- 15, p. 16, Michigan, Mecosta County, Big Rapids, First Ward, Roll 594, Microcopy T-9, *Tenth Census of the United States*, 1880, RG 29; and Obituary, *Owego Gazette*, 22 April 1915.

12. Obituary, *Owego Gazette*, 22 April 1915; Owen, Pension, RG 29; and 13015 VS 1865, LS, VSD, RG 94.